

Studies in English, New Series

Volume 4

Article 29

1983

Riehl, Charles Lamb's Children's Literature

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Recommended Citation

Schell, John F. (1983) "Riehl, Charles Lamb's Children's Literature," *Studies in English, New Series*: Vol. 4 , Article 29.

Available at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/studies_eng_new/vol4/iss1/29

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JOSEPH E. RIEHL. *CHARLES LAMB'S CHILDREN'S LITERATURE*. SALZBURG: UNIVERSITY OF SALZBURG, 1980 ["SALZBURG STUDIES IN ENGLISH: ROMANTIC REASSESSMENTS SERIES, NO. 94"]. ix, 213 pp. \$25.00.

Charles Lamb, surely one of the more widely read and enjoyed of the English Romantic writers, has not been well served by recent literary scholarship or criticism. Only now are his letters being edited and published in their entirety. His poetry is all but forgotten, his criticism ignored, even the essays of Elia praised rather than carefully analyzed. Nor have Lamb's works for children fared better. For instance, in Arbuthnot and Sutherland's *Children and Books* (Scott, Foresman and Co., 1972), a widely used textbook for the study of children's literature, Lamb rates one sentence. Likewise, *A Critical History of Children's Literature* (Macmillan, 1969) gives only passing comment to his stories and poems for children. Because of this neglect, Joseph Riehl's book is welcome.

Charles Lamb's Children's Literature is really three studies, united by a common focus upon those stories and poems for children written by Charles and Mary Lamb. The first is the longest and most thorough. In this study, Riehl theorizes that Lamb lacked sympathy for the moralizing and sentimental stories written by the popular authors of his day. Rather, Lamb believed that stories should spark the imagination of children and trust their intelligence. To prove his point, Riehl discusses in turn each of Lamb's works for children, demonstrating how each reflects its author's image of children, his theory of education, and his impatience with overt moralizing. Riehl admits, however, that the last of Lamb's works for children is also "disappointingly moralistic and didactic." In the process of proving his thesis, Riehl also lays to rest the suggestion that Godwin—Lamb's publisher—influenced Lamb's writing.

The title of the second study, "The Relation Between Lamb's Children's Works and the Later Essays," promises to make a significant contribution to Lamb studies. The section, however, is a disappointment. Riehl confines his analysis to thematic concerns, pointing out the subjects and themes that first appear in Lamb's works for children and recur in his later essays. Riehl's conclusion to this section reveals his limited scope: "Lamb's children's writings shed light on the later writings because they are often the first inchoate formulations of later important ideas and opinions. They show, if not the growth of Lamb's ideas, at least the first instances of those ideas in

print" (p. 177). The third study compares the attitudes of Lamb, Coleridge, and Wordsworth with the ideas about children discussed in the first two studies. It is an interesting, if brief, review.

What Riehl sets out to do—to study Lamb's views concerning children, their stories, and their education—he fully accomplishes. He examines these subjects from three perspectives; his research and scholarship are admirable. Because of Riehl's facility, it is too bad that he didn't tackle a more formidable issue, a more significant aspect of Lamb's literature for children. Perhaps it is unfair to criticize a work for what it is not. In the case of *Charles Lamb's Children's Literature*, however, one wishes the author had been more ambitious.

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